THE SACRED JOURNEY

4. Power

April 1, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Ezekiel 37:1-6, 14
John 11:1, 17-27

"And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live,..."
-Ezekiel 37:14a (RSV)

At the top of her career as a popular comedienne, someone asked Phyllis Diller to what she attributed her ability to make people laugh. She thought for a moment and said, "When you have the matter of death resolved, the rest is easy."

The distinguished psychologist, Abraham Maslow, was recuperating from a heart attack when he wrote to a friend

> "The confrontation with death - and the reprieve from it - makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful... Death, and its ever present possibility, makes love, passionate love, more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all if we knew we'd never die." [Rollo May, Love and Will, p. 99]

And so, two weeks before Easter, as preface to the drama of the passion, the entry to Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the trial and crucifixion, we come to the question that lies beneath all our questions: how shall we live in the presence of the reality of death?

No one ever put the issue more powerfully and eloquently than Macbeth...

> "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time:
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death..."

Along the way, this matter of death, death in general and our death in particular, is something with which we must contend. It is not easy to do so. It is a topic easily and conveniently ignored. In a culture whose values are success, power, winning - death is the ultimate irony... the ultimate, and inevitable loss. "The one who dies with the most toys wins." Perhaps, but the bottom line is not much of a victory.

Our way of life insultates us from dying... it happens mostly in the sterile isolation of a hospital room. Death is the new pornography, someone noted. Scotsman George Docherty used to say that in his native land sex was unmentionable and all the jokes were about death. Today, in this country, it's the other way around. Death is unmentionable and most of the jokes are about sex.

And then one day you bump into it: a dear friend dies, or you find you are looking at the obituaries with more personal attentiveness than usual, or suddenly, out of the blue, you are reminded of your own mortality. "Have you noticed that you will die?" Annie Dillard asks innocently. It is the most profound question with which the artist contends, the source either of a maddening despair, or perhaps the loveliest creativity. But confront it we must, and you can either deal with this matter or push it away, back into the recesses of your mind where it will not stay for long. The famous existentialists Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus agreed that there is a sense in which you are not alive until you embrace your own death... which is surely part of what Abraham Maslow meant. And it is surely what happened to a peculiar prophet of Israel by the name of Ezekiel one day, but that does get us ahead of ourselves.

I have been proposing recently that one of the ways to look at our own lives is as journeys of faith, **sacred journeys**... that we are called to this journey by our creator, given provisions along the way, including the confidence we need. I have been proposing that the story of God's people in the scripture of the Old Testament, is, in a sense, a metaphor for the story of everyone of us; that we can see our own lives and experiences in the mirror of the Bible... the lives and experience of the individuals in the story; but also in the whole, sweeping panorama.

So we thought about Abraham and Sarah: settled, mature, established, and how God called them to pack up and move and made an unlikely promise that they still had quite a future to live; and how it is the nature of God to call us to the adventure of living faithfully.

And we thought about the children of Israel after their unlikely liberation from Egyptian slavery, "murmuring in the wilderness," complaining to Moses because there was no food and no water, and how good the security of slavery looks when you are in the wilderness; and how when you know how hungry and empty and vulnerable you are, God provides for your deepest needs.

And we thought about how when God needs a King for Israel, the choice falls on someone who does not appear to be qualified, a wisp of a lad by the name of David, and we thought about God's love for and faithfulness to

David even though David does some terrible things; and we considered the mystery that there is nothing we can do to cause God to stop loving us. God sees possibility in all of us, and seeing our potential, has confidence in us.

Today, as we continue the story of God's people, the journey comes to a difficult time, a time of loss and grief; a time when it does not seem plausible that meaningful life can go on. That, too, is a metaphor for a stage in life's journey for each of us. But first the story.

It is about the exile, a very important period in Biblical history. In the year 598 B.C. the small Jewish state had become a nuisance to the ascendant Babylonian Empire: so the Babylonians carried off a small group of Jewish leaders from Jerusalem into Babylonian exile. A temple priest by the name of Ezekiel was among them. The Jerusalem government entered an unwise military pact with Egypt; the Babylonians became very angry, sent their army back in, this time leveling the city, executing the royal family, and exiling the entire ruling class - the upper crust of Jerusalem society. It would appear to be the end of the line. After their escape from Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, the conquest and settling of the land, the unification of the people under a monarchy... it would appear that Israel was confronting the fate of every earthly kingdom - extinction. After years in Babylonian exile, the Jewish community would simply disappear, melt into the prevailing culture of Babylon. Ezekiel, without a temple to be a priest in, becomes a prophet and begins to interpret the events he is watching unfold, putting them in the larger context of God's will. And so it is that Ezekiel has a vision of a valley strewn with bones, an eloquent symbol of death of his nation's prospects. Some historians suggest that there actually was such a valley, a battlefield where the armies of Israel lost to the Babylonian forces, that all those bones were what remained of Israel's fighting force, and that the exiles saw that sight on the long march into captivity.

In any event, it is a grim, but powerful image. But, in his vision Ezekiel receives an astonishing promise. The bones will live. God will breathe breath into them and they will live. In the midst of death - life. In the midst of the most eloquent image of human mortality - God's dearest promise of power to go on living.

The promise of faith is that God's love is more powerful than death and that therefore, ultimately, there is no reason to fear. The Bible doesn't say much more than that on the subject. The church, of course, has speculated endlessly on who gets in and who doesn't; religion has been entranced with the topic... "the guest list and the decor of eternity," someone quipped. The Bible doesn't. What the Bible focuses on is the promise of God's eternal love which transforms death into life: despair into joy, and turns into power for living in the present for those who know it and trust it.

"I will put my spirit in you and you will live," God says to the dry bones in Ezekiel's dream; and to anyone else who happens to feel like those bones, like death warmed over - which means all of us, sooner or later.

The simple truth is that on this journey there are going to be bad days. It is not possible ultimately to insulate yourself. It is not possible to love very long without sustaining a loss. Sigmund Freud taught that it is a primal and basic fear and that every small separation in life reminds us of final and ultimate separation.

It comes at us in different ways, of course. The death of a loved one, the death of our own grandparents and parents: the random death of dear friends.

People who measure stress say it is the most traumatic thing that will ever happen to us. Sometimes it comes in the form of the little losses that occur along the way; on the day when we must lower our expectations, and let go of a dream, and get realistic about the possibilities for the remainder of the journey.

And in this culture at this time it comes in the form of our obsession with youth and absolute refusal to acknowledge aging. Dear Jessica Tandy struck a blow for all of us... but did you notice that the Health and Fitness supplement in the newspaper last week was full of advertisements, not for ways to stay fit and healthy as you get older and the task becomes more difficult, but ads for liposuction and face lifts? That is, ways to deny the reality of aging and mortality.

How to live remains the question. How to find power to live in light of life's losses and the diminishments of aging and the personal insult of our mortality? How shall Israel live in exile? How shall we live through and beyond our losses?

The ancient promise is that death is part of God's economy, and that it is not an enemy, not because it isn't real and tragic, which it is, but because God's love creates life in its midst. Hard to believe? You bet it is. And yet, there is a gentle wisdom in God's economy; people who have thought about it for very long and with any depth, seem always to conclude that there is a wisdom in this mortality of ours.

Maslow knew that without death there would be no love, no passion, no ecstasy.

John Updike in his recently published memoir, Self Consciousness, closes with an essay in which he reflects on his own journey in maturing. "Aging," he says, "calls us outdoors, after the adult indoors of work and love-life and keeping stylish, into the lovely simplicities that we thought we had out-grown as children. We come again to love the plain world, its stone and wood, its air and water... The act of seeing is itself glorious, and of hearing, and feeling and tasting." [p. 247]

Frederick Buechner wrote that as a young man he would have jumped at the chance to remain young forever, but that he has changed his mind. "I love my life as much as I ever did and will cling to it for as long as I can, but life without death has become as unthinkable to me as day without night or waking without sleep."

There is a sense in which we are given the grace to love fully insofar as we acknowledge our mortality. And there is a sense in which we are given power to live fully insofar as we can trust God with our own death.

That is what is going on in the 11th chapter of the Gospel of John - in a New Testament story every bit as powerful and terrible and mysterious as Ezekiel's vision - the raising of Lazarus.

It is the event that immediately precedes Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem. It is the event that so frightens everybody that the process is set in motion that will result in his arrest and crucifixion. The authorities understand with perfect clarity, that one who has power over death will threaten every other authority and power. So they determine, as soon as they hear about Lazarus, to do away with him.

The exiled community must look at the reality of dry bones in order to know God's power of life.

Jesus must confront the death of his dear friend Lazarus - maybe his best and oldest friend... must go to the tomb on a blazing hot afternoon and there with the stench of death all around confront the fact of his own mortality. When he hears about Lazarus' death, he doesn't do anything for several days. Why? Because when you are thirty-three and your best friend dies and there's a rumor that your life is in danger... you simply don't want to have anything to do with it. And when he finally arrives at Bethlehem, he weeps for his dear dead friend, for friendship gone, but also for himself. Jesus, our brother, weeps tears of grief... for his own mortality.

What happened next will not be reduced to words and perhaps should not be...

But faith knows that God created life in the midst of death...

And that for Jesus, this drama will become personal, as personal as it can possible become; that he will know the end of his thirty-three year old life and will have to either give it up to despair and cynicism and rage - or trust it to God.

That is a metaphor for what comes to all of us and each of us on this journey... that day - or string of days - when we know our mortality and must decide who we will trust and how we will live; that day when we must open our hands and let go of those we dearly love and give them up to God, and then noticing how empty our hands are - give our own death to God and in that giving, receive power to live.

The promise of the Gospel is this... in Jesus Christ God has loved us. That love gives us the gift life... calls us to the adventure of living faithfully... provides for our deepest needs... gives us confidence that we are adequate for the challenges and now, that love promises there is nothing ultimately to fear... There is no tragedy out of which God cannot call new life.

I do not know how Ezekiel saw what he saw and I do not know what happened that day when Jesus strode up to a tomb holding the dead body of his friend Lazarus, but I believe what he said there is for you and me:

"Take away the stone, come out, unbind him and let him go."

That's for you and me.

Even though the church must now journey through the most difficult days of Lent: days for the remembering of triumph turned into tragedy, betrayal and denial, humiliation and suffering... and finally - the tragic, beautiful mystery of Good Friday... even though our journey now becomes arduous, it is a **Sacred Journey**, particularly now because of the one who said,

"I am the resurrection and the life: he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live..."

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Eternal God, there are no words to contain our gratitude for your love; no way to express our heart's intent to trust you with our lives.

So we come to table, as he invited us to come, his guests... even Jesus our Lord.

Amen.